

Discipline-Based Art Education

A third, widespread theory of arts education programming can be found in Discipline-Based Art Education, or DBAE. DBAE is an approach to arts education developed and formalized in the early 1980s by the Getty Center for Arts Education (later known as the Getty Education Institute), a division of the J. Paul Getty Trust, which is a private foundation dedicated to the visual arts and the humanities. DBAE is not an original theory, but rather a conceptual framework which incorporates elements from many other educational theories (such as VTS).

DBAE seeks to impart a well-rounded view of art by studying any given work or type of work using four different disciplines, tailored to specific ages and grade levels:

1. **Art Production** – Students learn skills and techniques in order to produce personal, original artwork.
2. **Art History** – Students study the artistic accomplishments of the past and present as motivation, examples of style or technique, and as discussion topics, especially in relation to cultural, political, social, religious, and economic events and movements.
3. **Art Criticism** – Students describe, interpret, evaluate, theorize and judge the properties and qualities of the visual form, for the purpose of understanding and appreciating works of art and understanding the roles of art in society.
4. **Aesthetics** – Students consider the nature, meaning, impact and value of art, are encouraged to formulate reflective, “educated” opinions and judgments about specific works of art, and examine criteria for evaluating works of art.¹⁷

DBAE was originally developed for use with the visual arts and then evolved to encompass the study of multiple fields – dance, drama, and music. It may also be used in multiple settings, including higher education, lifelong learning centers and art museums, although it is most commonly applied to the visual arts in a classroom setting.¹⁸

Like both Visual Thinking Strategies and the New Museum model, Discipline-Based Art Education is a form of **inquiry-based training**; the focus is on the students and their interests, judgment, reasoning and critical-thinking skills. Open-ended inquiry, group discussions and problem-solving also play significant roles in the curriculum, and classroom teachers are viewed as important collaborators in the process (although they also disseminate information and provide direction, as necessary).¹⁹ DBAE differs from either of the two models previously discussed in that it tends to have **broader educational goals** and **more structured and directed curricula**.

The intention of the Getty Institute is to **broaden the content and strengthen the requirements of arts education within the school system**.²⁰ The use of all four disciplines was developed as a reaction to the idea that art in schools has traditionally been taught exclusively through production, which (because of differing

¹⁷ Stephen Mark Dobbs. Learning in and through Art: A Guide to Discipline-Based Art Education. (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1998), 3-4.

¹⁸ Ibid, Preface.

¹⁹ Alabama Institute for Education in the Arts, 27 April 2004 <www.artseducation.org/dbae.html>

²⁰ Sandra Hildreth, Art Methods Curriculum, 27 April 2004 <www.northnet.org/hildreth/dbae.htm>

levels of interest, talent and success) has limited effectiveness.²¹ This comprehensive, more integrated approach to arts education lends itself well to the further incorporation of other disciplines. For example, learning about art by studying its history is akin to studying certain historical or social periods through examination of the artworks they produced. In practice, DBAE tends to stray from purely artistic or aesthetic goals and becomes more of a general education technique.

The DBAE curricular structure has far-reaching objectives. In addition to exploring and understanding the story, aesthetic and technique of a specific work, it contextualizes the work and the artist in historical periods, influences and artistic movements. (In this sense, DBAE is teaching to what Housen and the Visual Understanding in Education group would designate a Stage III or IV viewer. DBAE also includes art production and art history as necessary – even primary – parts of the curriculum, whereas VTS and the New Museum model are concerned chiefly with the aesthetic response.

While DBAE does not prescribe a specific curriculum, it does call for the development or use of a specific, written curriculum plan. While these plans may differ in terms of emphasis, detail, artworks, and activities, they share five basic beliefs:

- A long-range plan and **written lessons** ensure that curricular activities are specific, well understood, and coordinated with other grades.
- **Sequential organization** allows skills and concepts to build on one another through regular, systematic, ongoing instruction.
- Engagement with works of art by **mature artists from many cultures** is central to the organization of curricula.
- **Content is balanced among the four art disciplines** (production, history, criticism and aesthetics) to promote engagement from multiple perspectives.
- Developmentally suitable and **age-appropriate learning activities** maximize student learning.²²

The plans called for by DBAE are, by definition, flexible and adaptable to specific student needs, cultures and proclivities. They also require fairly broad-based district administrative support in order to ensure availability of resources and curricular continuity.²³

In striving to be as flexible and comprehensive as possible, DBAE curricula also tend to differ from other arts education models in a crucial way: often, **art is used as an instrument to teach other subjects, rather than as an end in and of itself.** One curriculum plan, for example, suggests studying popular music from the 1930s, the work of the Ashcan artists and the stage version of *The Grapes of Wrath* as a method of learning about the Great Depression.²⁴ Aesthetic development is not a primary goal, but rather, a secondary byproduct, acquired while seeking to increase higher order critical thinking skills, reasoning and creativity.

²¹ Sandra Hildreth, Art Methods Curriculum, 27 April 2004 <www.northnet.org/hildreth/dbae.htm>

²² Stephen Mark Dobbs. *The DBAE Handbook: An Overview of Discipline-Based Art Education*. (Santa Monica: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1992), 23-24.

²³ *ibid*, 24-25.

²⁴ Alabama Institute for Education in the Arts, 27 April 2004: <www.artseducation.org/dbae.html>

The benefit to DBAE's instrumental approach is that the arts are more readily incorporated into all areas of classroom learning. Many types of art may be applied to the study of a variety of academic subjects. The intention is for students to understand the interrelationships of all subjects and disciplines, artistic and academic. So, while the study of art may not be the exclusive focus with DBAE, as it is with VTS or the New Museum model, it is arguably more widespread and better integrated into the classroom.

DBAE also includes **evaluation of student achievement** as an integral part of the program and essential in determining effectiveness. But, given the inherent difficulty of measuring performance in art disciplines, no widely published or canonical techniques for doing so have been developed yet.²⁵ DBAE does not specify the form evaluation should take. Since arts educators are generally resistant to standardized testing, more qualitative, subjective measures are often used. For example, some educators may evaluate performance and development on the basis of student portfolios, which comprise a body of work in all four disciplines. Evaluation will continue to be a particular challenge for DBAE and other arts education methodologies, until a comprehensive system of assessment is adopted.

Despite the fact that Discipline-Based Art Education is as well-known and widely used as any of the theories discussed in this chapter, at present, **DBAE's future is uncertain**. The Getty Education Institute was a major supporter of the use and development of this approach via the Regional Institute Grant (RIG) program, which financed regional institutes across the country to spearhead DBAE's advancement. Over the course of ten years, thousands of teachers and administrators in 217 school districts were trained in DBAE. In late 1997, however, the Getty Trust underwent a major change in focus and leadership, and soon afterward, the Getty Education Institute was closed. The RIG program no longer funds DBAE institutes, and the Getty is no longer directly involved in the dissemination and promotion of DBAE.²⁶

²⁵ Stephen Mark Dobbs. Learning in and through Art: A Guide to Discipline-Based Art Education. (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1998), 73-75.

²⁶ National Art Education Consortium, Transforming Education Through the Arts Challenge: Final Project Report. (Columbus, Ohio), 17-18.